DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 148 664 SO 010 525

AUTHOR Meyersohn, Rolf
TITLE The Sociology of Popular Culture: Looking Backwards and Forwards.
PUB DATE 5 Sep 77
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (72nd, Chicago, Illinois, September 5-9, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Culture; *Popular Culture; *Social History; *Social Sciences; *Sociocultural Patterns; *Sociology

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the field of study of popular culture and traces its history from 1930 to the present. The study of popular culture consists of examining all elements of human activity and life style, including knowledge, belief, art, and customs that are common to a large group. These popular culture elements have been disseminated mainly, not necessarily, through the mass media. Popular cultural analysis has suffered greatly from the value orientation of its researchers. Negative views of popular culture resulting from its linkage in the minds of social scientists to facism and capitalism predominated the field from the 1930s through the 1950s. In the 1960s popular culture became linked with political forces approved of by many social scientists and has since then been treated in a more positive manner. The tendency in both periods was to regard the study of popular culture as valuable only in terms of the effect of popular culture on political and social institutions. The author concludes with a plea for serious sociological study of popular culture. (DRS)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED148664

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Rolf Meyersohn
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

NOV 23

THE SOCIOLOGY OF POPULAR CULTURE: LOOKING BACKWARDS AND FORWARDS

Rolf Meyersohn
Herbert H. Lehman College
and
The Graduate School
City University of New York

Paper presented at the 72nd Annual Meeting of the
American Sociological Association, Chicago, Illinois
September 5, 1977

SO 010 525

NOV 23 1977

THE SOCIOLOGY OF POPULAR CULTURE: LOOKING BACKWARDS AND FORWARDS

Rolf Meyersohn

Introduction

In the traditional academic community, the student of popular culture is treated almost like astrologers are treated in the scientific community: You must be kidding to take that stuff seriously! But unlike astrologers, who are clearly outside the academy, students of popular culture remain within it. In their quite natural quest for respectability they have developed the whole machinery of academic discipline for the study of this subject matter, yet the subject matter of popular culture still remains to a large extent hidden from view. In our search for profound significance we fail to see what Mary Douglas has called the "tacit conventions."

My generation is perhaps more hindered in its treatment of popular culture than younger colleagues. For those of us growing up in the 1930's and 1940's, popular culture was inseparable from politics, particularly the politics of fascism; and the study of popular culture was linked with the study of fascism. Those growing up in the 1960's could consider the sociology of counter-culture, which became popular culture for a sizeable part of the society, and they could be enthusiastic in a positive sense, much as our generation had been passionate in a negative sense.

Looking backwards, then, we see an examination of popular culture that had been saddled with a heavy critique; looking forward, we can hope for an examination of popular culture that takes it on its own terms, as entertainment. Let me elaborate the backwards look first.

I

Until the 1930's, there was no systematic effort to understand or even describe popular culture sociologically. The major earlier work using popular culture was Veblen's The Theory of the Leisure Class, in which a number of popular culture activities, such as gardening, fashions, the use of household pets, and forms of popular entertainment, were described; but their description was part of a critique of upwardly mobile families for whom social position was problematic. The book is certainly not a study of popular culture, though it is a landmark in taking seriously non-serious phenomena.

The now classic community studies, such as Middletown, looked at popular entertainment, particularly how it differed among various social classes, but again the purpose was hardly that of elaborating the sociology of popular culture; rather, it was an effort to describe the various forms of leisure life in which different classes of Middletowners engaged--and how their choices reaffirmed their class position.

It was in the 1930's that popular culture phenomena began to be examined critically. Indeed, the word critical was part and parcel of such an examination. The Frankfurt Institut für Sozialforschung was predominant in its critique of popular culture. It did take it seriously, perhaps even too seriously. But after all it was in Nazi Germany that

the transformation of popular culture in the service of the state was most widespread and most thorough. In the intrusion into every-day life, Nazism spared no effort to transform all kinds of mundane parts of life into politically freighted activity. And during World War II, all combatants used both popular culture and high culture materials for propaganda purposes. When the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939, the excellent Polish cavalry fell at once before German tanks, but the Warsaw radio played Chopin twenty-four hours a day until finally the station was seized. The Nazi's reaction, once they seized it, was apparently the death penalty for any performance of Chopin music.

Similarly, the United States used its popular music to win support throughout the underground listening world of occupied Europe and elsewhere. As Theodor Adorno wrote in 1942:

> Under conditions of isolation from the outer world now existing in Nazi-dominated Europe, every sound is capable of assuming political significance quite out of proportion to its actual content and political bearing. For people overfed with politics, the indirect stimulus of popular music might have more propaganda value than a direct political message. This seems particularly likely in view of the fact that the Nazis, while banning foreign music, have not themselves succeeded in providing substitutes.[1]

Adorno recommended musical warfare.

Such connections between popular culture and society were probably quite obvious to everyone alive in those days, an obviousness which did not really help in the study of popular culture, for it made it so clearly a manifest item whose latent functions had to be examined, rather than social constructions whose characteristics and uses and gratifications

---

[1] Cited in John Gray Peatman, "Radio and Popular Music," in Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Frank Stanton, editors, Radio Research, 1942-43. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1944, p. 390.

could be analyzed.

The study of popular culture was the study of a phenomenon to which social scientists did not really grant the right to exist as such, as entertainment, but whose research justification had to come from the varieties of meaning that could be imputed. Such meanings had largely elitist overtones, for most students of popular culture were not "natives," but intellectuals. Most of us did not enjoy the popular music we examined, or the soap operas or the latest fads and fashions; it was not research con amore but more likely with contempt.

The meanings imputed reflected rather naively the theoretical apparatus current at the time--quite naturally. Perhaps the most insidious term applied throughout the period was kitsch, that is, popular culture trash, not exactly a terminus technicus but a value laden dismissal of other people's tastes. More penetrating or wounding was the other vogue term, irrational.

A brilliant study of astrology columns in the Los Angeles Times, which Adorno carried out shortly after the War, illustrates well the kind of mode in which popular culture analysis was turned into societal criticism. The possibility that astrology columns might entertain, that along with following the sports columns, or the adventures of Dagwood and Blondie, the folks that read the paper enjoy the malarky of astrology, was not mentioned. Adorno labeled it a secondary superstition, and could see it only as irrational, and he used an old-fashioned model of scientific progress to justify this view.

> In former periods, superstition was an attempt, however, awkward, to cope with problems for which no better or more rational means were available....Today, however, the incompatibility of the progress of the natural sciences such as astro-physics, with a belief in astrology is blatant. Those who combine both are forced to an intellectual retrogression which formerly was hardly required.

The thematic analysis is indeed brilliant, and as might be expected, authoritarianism plays a large role. But the connection to fascism was also there. Indeed he saw astrology as a system much like fascism.

> Just as those who can read the phony signs of the stars believe that they are in the know, the followers of totalitarian parties believe that their special panaceas are universally valid and feel justified in imposing them as a general rule. The paradoxical idea of a one-party state...is the consummation of a trend feebly presaged by the opinionated, inaccessible attitude of the astrological adept who defends his creed by hook or crook without ever entering into a real argument, who has auxiliary hypotheses in order to defend himself even where his statements are blatantly erroneous and who ultimately cannot be spoken to, probably not be reached at all and lives on a kind of narcissistic island.

Whereas astrology could be seen as a <u>game</u> with its own rules and its distinct separation from reality, Adorno only saw it in political-cultural terms. This analysis is not singled out because it is weak; quite the contrary; it is one of the finest examples of Adorno's unsurpassed content analysis style.

The effort in popular culture studies in this period were closely modeled after Freud. After all, one of the single greatest social scientific contributions is Freud's discovery of the unconscious, his detection of patterns and themes in everyday behavior, the determination of mental life, the connection between the manifest dream content and the latent meaning. But in looking at the manifest one can miss the playful, the teasing, the multi-layered qualities of cultural life. The fallacy of

attributing to societies the qualities of individuals was never practiced more flagrantly than in popular culture analysis. Motifs represented nations, almost as in Wagnerian operas or in Peter and the Wolf, in which there are themes for every character. The irrational is probably the quintessential theme, because the infrastructure, whether fascism or capitalism, was seen as irrational.

Popular culture analysis was not only the analysis of kitsch and of the irrational. It was also the analysis of manipulated commodities. Popular culture critique was not only the critique of symbolic material which represented a deeply flawed society. It was also a critique of the material which was manipulated, either consciously by direct collusion between the producers of popular culture and leaders of the political system, or through processes of legitimation and incentive that indirectly and institutionally encouraged some kinds of materials. Regardless, popular culture was seen as manipulated culture, in the service of the status quo. Inherent in the fact that mass produced commodities are geared to a market was seen in the manipulative character of popular culture; created for so-called mass tastes, so-called mass audiences are manipulated to accept the fares that are offered.

Manipulation of course continues to be a theme in the analysis of popular culture. In Stanley Aronowitz's recent book, False Promises, there is an analysis of mass culture that is reminiscent of these earlier works:

> Mass culture contains a contradiction between the ideological need for stability, equilibrium and integration on the one hand and a latent need for creativity and innovation, on the other. The

former calls for the degradation of the artist and the intellectual into a mere functionary; the latter demands that he or she retain a degree of independence and a capacity for critical thinking. Thus even though the work of artists or filmmakers may remain strongly tied to the norms of the dominant consensus and of the system of class domination, it also may to some extent contain a critique of reality.

To summarize this backward glance. Popular culture analysis, for members of my generation and our elders was Kulturkritik. Popular culture tended to be regarded as manifest material through which to see the unconscious of society--an unconscious which in both capitalism and fascism reflected vast libidinal forces, largely evil or at best ambivalent. It was, secondly, seen as having little or no substance of its own but was labeled Kitsch, was seen as manipulated either consciously or unconsciously by the ruling forces in society, and it was denounced because of its mass produced character.

Most students of popular culture were not likely to be amused by their objects of study, but appalled. Worried by the disastrous state of the world and concerned by the popularity of pop culture, they linked the two. This view held through the 1950's.

II

During the 1960's, popular culture became linked with politics in a very different way. The youth movement became a distinct force, and its enthusiasm for various kinds of music and musicians, Bob Dylan, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Grateful Dead was not seen as serving a "narcotysing dysfunction." Quite the opposite. Narcotics were used as entertainment, rather than entertainment as narcotic.

For many decades popular culture has been used by adolescents as the emblem of their generation. But until the 1960's its use was manifestly apolitical and even anti-political. It was left to

sociologists to interpret the political meaning of such apolitical popular culture (though as I mentioned at the outset, the connections to social structure and society at large were easily made). But the war in Vietnam and its strong opposition among youth provided the most salient impetus for this change. Because the music was associated with political causes that were largely considered worthwhile by social scientists, it was no longer regarded as Kitsch, or commercial, or manipulated. Paul Hirsch points out that

> a rising proportion of best-selling songs contain lyrics that comment on controversial subjects previously avoided by song-writers...[But] call establishment norms into question...and sanction alternative courses of action.

He notes that progressive rock music began to develop a large enough following to enable radio stations to specialize in this one kind of music.

In general it can be said that the preoccupation with the cultural meaning of popular culture has (fortunately) abated. Perhaps with the pervasiveness of television it has become impossible to say anything intelligent about the state of the popular arts that can be globally true. Like the air we breathe, television has become part of our lives, and although we attack pollution <u>on</u> the air as we attack pollution <u>in</u> the air, we are less prone to make simple connections to the social structures and systems that appear to be responsible.

What has continued to preoccupy policy makers and therefore social scientists has been the study of <u>effects</u>. Earlier popular critics were more concerned with cultural impacts; the more recent researchers have been concerned with social impacts. Once again popular

culture has been largely ignored as a phenomenon as such, but regarded as containing virulent bacteria that might infect the young, or the weak, or the otherwise helpless, or maybe everyone. A multimillion dollar series of research inquiries sprang up, in which the finest talent in our academic community devoted some of the best years of their academic lives to working on task force studies. The work has had nothing to do with popular culture. The study of prevalent popular culture forms were relegated to the divisions of social science whose authority was vested in expertise in problem areas. And so, pornography, a widespread form of popular culture entertainment was studied by criminologists (and found largely harmless); violent drama on television was studied by mass communication experts.

It is therefore not really surprising that after several massive task force reports on areas that are the quintessence of popular culture, we know no more about popular culture than we did before. Social scientists were forced, perhaps by their own discipline, perhaps by the scientific models with which they were stuck, perhaps by the policy makers' terms of reference for the contracts they received, to ignore the phenomenon itself.

The magnificent bibliographies of television and human behavior, gathered in 1975 by George Comstock lists 2,300 citations; but there is not even a key word that would provide a clue that an entertainment medium was the subject of the inquiry.

The area of research coming closest to contributing to the sociology of popular culture is work in uses and gratifications. Yet that has been largely psychological, dealing with needs and their

satisfaction. As James Carey and Albert Kreiling note:

> For uses and gratifications research to deal with popular culture, matters of style and taste...should be elevated to focal concerns.

Citing Philip Ennis's 1961 article, they noted that research might "more wisely wed itself to the expressive rather than the cognitive or instrumental symbol."

Elihu Katz, in a recent elegant and wise report to the BBC, "Social Research on Broadcasting" notes the long-standing rift between the study of mass communications and the study of popular culture, and presents a six point agenda of proposals for research; one of these is on entertainment. He recognizes perhaps better than anyone that "entertainment is what television is all about."

The problem is how to study entertainment. Perhaps the most promising lead comes from Mihalyi Czikszentmihaly from the University of Chicago. In Beyond Boredom and Anxiety he reports a series of studies with people who were having peak experiences, who were intrinsically motivated, and who were involved in play as well as real life activities; he found that regardless of what they were doing, there were so-called flow experiences, somewhere between boredom (understimulation) and anxiety (overtaxing limited abilities).

The work did not utilize any of the more accepted popular culture activities, other than rock music dancing--that is, those in which no skill is required. The theory is based on a relationship between skill and difficulty. However it can be adapted to activities which are intrinsically rewarding but rely not on skill but on well-established cultural paths, such as chronic Kojak watching. Indeed Czikszentmihalyi

devotes a chapter to flow patterns in everyday life, in which he suggests that microflow experiences could exist.

All this is one side of entertainment and play; the other side needs exploration as well. I mean the sociology of boredom. Two major literary studies appeared in recent years, Siegfried Wenzel's The Sin of Sloth and Reinhard Kuhn's The Demon of Noontide. These help provide some of the categories of non-entertainment and varieties of ennui; but they need yet to be applied by social scientists. Considering the rather broad hints for such a long time that popular culture, and especially television, is boring, there ought to be some exploration of this possibility.

The field of popular culture as such has really been taken over by other disciplines, particularly history and literary studies. Historians have found it a rich vein to mine for an understanding of American society (and perhaps a way to keep students from leaving history altogether). The senior scholar of American studies, Henry Nash Smith has edited a book on the subject, Popular Culture and Industrialism, 1865-1890. In literary studies, a recent example is Ann Douglas's The Feminization of American Culture whose sources include much popular culture material. Last, but not least is the Journal of Popular Culture, published at Bowling Green University, which is a central source and focus for such work.

In conclusion I would like to take up Herb Gans's plea for serious sociological studies in popular culture, which he voiced recently in his Popular Culture and High Culture. He notes in the Preface that popular culture is not studied much either because of the anticommercial

bias of academic scholars--who appear to consider it worth studying only when it's created by unpaid folk or by serious artists--or because there seem to be so many serious problems to study that pop culture stud'es appear too trivial.

My own view is that the subject falls within the sociology of play. Victor Turner, in the current issue of Daedalus, invites collaborative study of the sort I have in mind--of "popular genres...which make statements in forms at least as bizarre as those of tribal liminality, about the quality of life under the guise of "entertainment"--a term which literally means 'holding between,' that is, liminalizing."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

T.W. Adorno. The Stars Down to Earth: The Los Angeles Times Astrology Column: A Study in Secondary Superstition. Jahrbuch fuer Amerikastudien, II, 1957. Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitaetsverlag, 1957.

Stanley Aronowitz. False Promises: The Shaping of American Working Class Consciousness. McGraw-Hill, 1973.

James Carey and Albert Kreiling, "Popular Culture and Uses and Gratification: Notes toward an Accommodation. Chapter 11 in Blumler & Katz, editors, The Uses of Mass Communications, Sage Annual Reviews of Communication Research, 1974.

George Comstock, et al. Television and Human Behavior. Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 1975. III volumes.

Mihalyi Czikszentmihalyi. Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: The Experience of Play in Work and Games. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975.

Paul Hirsch, "Sociological Approaches to the Pop Music Phenomenon," American Behavior Scientist, 14 (February 1971).

Elihu Katz. Social Research on Broadcasting: Proposals for Further Development. A Report to the BBC. 1977.

Reinhard Kuhn, The Demon of Noontide: Ennui in Western Literature. Princeton University Press, 1976.

Victor Turner, "Process, System, and Symbol: A New Anthropological Synthesis." Daedalus, Summer 1977.

Siegfried Wenzel. The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967.